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Oration on Voltaire

Victor Hugo

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ORATION ON VOLTAIRE

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Translated by James Parton.

INTRODUCTION

This oration of Victor Hugo brings out in clear contrast a strange contradiction. Our progress is but an evolution from and at the same time it is a revolt against the past.

"The thoughts of men are widened by the process of the suns."
"Yet the mighty dead still rule us from their urns."

This apparent contradiction exists because the peoples are not as yet familiar with the law of evolution in social progress. The picture of a child imprisoned within the ribs of a skeleton is the picture of the world that many have for want of this conception of time and growth. They revolt against the order of time, because time is not solid, and is only visible to the eye of the intellect.

Therefore such revolts have been necessary. They are the great revolutions and social volcanoes of which Paris has been the favorite crater in Europe. Hugo's great soul has seized the lights and shadows of the great catastro-

phes of the 18th century, and, their meaning visible to mankind forever in his wonderful oration.

It is a warning, a consecration, and a hope. It tells that progress is the only condition of human safety. It consecrates the noble Voltaire who made its conditions possible. It is a prophecy of hope and peace in evolution under the light of knowledge and love. It is the inspiration of every liberated soul to realize this aspiration for "peace on earth and good will to men," which rises immeasurably higher than any Christian myth ever dreamed.

The magnificent word painting of this oration and its inspiration is one of the highest points humanity has ever reached. We are at a loss to find anything superior to it. Compare with it the great orations of Pericles, Demosthenes, Cicero, Chatham, Mirabeau, Henry, Webster, or the consecration of the dead at Gettysburg of Abraham Lincoln, and you will feel that those mighty voices were limited by local and temporary interests and feelings.

Hugo has spoken for all the races of earth and for all time. He has realized to the heart and eye humanity's heaven of progress sustained by all of the powers of the good in the

human soul. To those who can but catch a glimpse of its mighty meaning it will be a treasure forever. No one can read and understand it and be the same person he was before.

Hugo, the greatest French poet of his century, perhaps the greatest French poet of all time, was a fervent Theist, reverencing the prophet of Nazareth as a man, and holding that "the divine tear" of Jesus and "the human smile" of Voltaire "compose the sweetness of the present civilization." But he was perfectly free from the trammels of creeds, and he hated priestcraft, like despotism, with a perfect hatred. In one of his striking later poems, *Religien et les Religions*, he derides and denounces the tenets and pretensions of Christianity. The Devil, he says to the clergy, is only the monkey of superstition; your Hell is an outrage on Humanity and a blasphemy against God; and when you tell me that your deity made you in his own image, I reply that he must be very ugly.

As a man, as well as a writer, there was something magnificently grandiose about him. Subtract him from the nineteenth century, and you rob it of much of its glory. For nineteen years on a lonely channel island, an exile from

the land of his birth and his love, he nursed the conscience of humanity within his mighty heart, brandishing the lightnings and thunders of chastisement over the heads of the political brigands who were stifling a nation, and prophesying their certain doom. When it came, after Sedan, he returned to Paris, and for fifteen years he was idolised by its people. There was great mourning at his death, and "all Paris" attended his funeral. But true to the simplicity of his life he ordered that his body should lie in a common coffin, which contrasted vividly with the splendid procession. France buried him, as she did Gambetta; he was laid to rest in the Church of St. Genevieve, re-secularized as the pantheon for the occasion; and the interment took place without any religious rites.

Hugo's great oration on Voltaire, in 1878, roused the ire of the Bishop of Orleans, who reprimanded him in a public letter. The free-thinking poet sent a crushing reply:

"France had to pass an ordeal. France was free. A man traitorously seized her in the night, threw her down and garrotted her. If a people could be killed, that man had slain France. He made her dead enough for him to reign over her. He began his reign, since it was a reign, with perjury, lying in wait, and massacre. He continued it by oppression, by tyranny, by despot-

ism, by an unspeakable parody of religion and justice. He was monstrous and little. The Deum Magnificat, Salvum fac, Gloria tibi, were sung for him. Who sang them? Ask yourself. The law delivered the people up to him. The church delivered God up to him. Under that man sank down right, honor, country; he had beneath his feet oath, equity, probity, the glory of the flag, the dignity of men, the liberty of citizens. That man's prosperity disconcerted the human conscience. It lasted nineteen years. During that time you were in a palace. I was in exile. I pity you, sir."

Despite this terrible rebuff to Bishop Dupanloup, another priest, Cardinal Guibert, Archbishop of Paris, had the termerity and bad taste to obtrude himself when Victor Hugo lay dying in 1885. Being born on February 25, 1802, the poet was in his eighty-fourth year, and expiring naturally of old age. Had the rites of the Church been performed on him in such circumstances, it would have been an insufferable farce. Yet the Archbishop wrote to Madame Lockroy, offering to bring personally "the succor and consolation so much needed in these cruel ordeals." Monsieur Lockroy at once replied as follows:

"Madame Lockroy, who cannot leave the bedside of her father-in-law, begs me to thank you for the sentiments which you have expressed with so much eloquence and kindness. As re-

gards M. Victor Hugo, he has again said within the last few days, that he had no wish during his illness to be attended by a priest of any persuasion. We should be wanting in our duty if we did not respect his resolution."

VICTOR HUGO'S ORATION ON VOLTAIRE

Delivered at Paris, May 30, 1878, the hundredth anniversary of Voltaire's death.

A hundred years ago today a man died. He died immortal. He departed laden with years, laden with works, laden with the most illustrious and the most fearful of responsibilities, the responsibility of the human conscience informed and rectified. He went cursed and blessed, cursed by the past, blessed by the future; and these, gentlemen, are the two superb forms of glory. On his death bed he had, on the one hand, the acclaim of contemporaries and of posterity; on the other, that triumph of hooting and of hate which the implacable past bestows upon those who have combatted it. He was more than a man; he was an age. He had exercised a function and fulfilled a mission. He had been evidently chosen for the work which he had done, by the supreme will,

which manifests itself as visibly in the laws of destiny as in the laws of nature.

The eighty-four years which this man lived occupy the interval that separates the monarchy at its apogee from the revolution at its dawn. When he was born Louis XIV still reigned, when he died Louis XVI reigned already; so that his cradle could see the last rays of the great throne, and his coffin the first gleams from the great abyss. [Applause.]

Before going further, let us come to an understanding, gentlemen, upon the word abyss. There are good abysses: such are the abysses in which evil is engulfed. [Bravo!]

Gentlemen, since I have interrupted myself, allow me to complete my thought. No word imprudent or unsound will be pronounced here. We are here to perform an act of civilization. We are here to make affirmation of progress, to pay respect to philosophers for the benefits of philosophy, to bring to the eighteenth century the testimony of the nineteenth, to honor magnanimous combatants and good servants, to felicitate the noble effort of peoples, industry, science, the valiant march in advance, the toil to cement human accord; in one word, to glorify peace, that sublime, universal desire. Peace is the virtue of civilization; war is its

crime. [Applause.] We are here, at this grand moment, in this solemn hour to bow religiously before the moral law, and to say to the world, which hears France, this: There is only one power, conscience in the service of justice; and there is only one glory, genius in the service of truth. [Movement.] That said, I continue.

Before the revolution, gentlemen, the social structure was this:

At the base, the people:

Above the people, religion represented by the clergy;

By the side of religion, justice represented by the magistracy.

And, at that period of human society, what was the people? It was ignorance. What was religion? It was intolerance. And what was justice? It was injustice. Am I going too far in my words? Judge.

I will confine myself to the citation of two facts, but decisive.

At Toulouse, October 13, 1761, there was found in a lower story of a house, a young man hanged. The crowd gathered, the clergy fulminated, the magistracy investigated. It was a suicide; they made of it an assassination. In what interest? In the interest of religion.

And who was accused? The father. He was a Huguenot, and he wished to hinder his son from becoming a Catholic. There was here a moral monstrosity and a material impossibility; no matter! This father had killed his son; this old man had hanged this young man. Justice travailled, and this was the result. On the month of March, 1762, a man with white hair, Jean Calas, was conducted to a public place, stripped naked, stretched upon a wheel, the members bound upon it, the head hanging. Three men are there upon a scaffold, a magistrate, named David, charged to superintend the punishment, a priest to hold the crucifix, and the executioner with a bar of iron in his hand. The patient, stupefied and terrible, regards not the priest, and looks at the executioner. The executioner lifts the bar of iron, and breaks one of his arms. The victim groans and swoons. The magistrate comes forward; they make the condemned inhale salts; he returns to life. Then another stroke of the bar; another groan. Calas loses consciousness; they revive him, and the executioner begins again; and, as each limb before being broken in two places receives two blows, that makes eight punishments. After the eighth swooning the priest offers him the crucifix to kiss; Calas

turns away his head, and the executioner gives him the *coup de grace;* that is to say, crushes in his chest with the thick end of the bar of iron. So died Jean Calas.

That lasted two hours. After his death, the evidence of the suicide came to light. But an assassination had been committed. By whom? By the judges. [Great sensation. Applause.]

Another fact. After the old man, the young man. Three years later, in 1765, at Abbeville, the day after a night of storm and high wind, there was found upon the pavement of a bridge an old crucifix of worm-eaten wood, which for three centuries had been fastened to the parapet. Who had thrown down this crucifix? Who had committed this sacrilege? It is not known. Perhaps a passerby. Perhaps the wind. Who is the guilty one? The Bishop of Amiens launches a *monitoire.* Note what a *monitoire* was: it was an order to all the faithful, on pain of hell, to declare what they knew or believed they knew of such or such a fact; a murderous injunction, when addressed by fanaticism to ignorance. The *monitoire* of the Bishop of Amiens does its work; the town gossip assumes the character of the crime charged. Justice discovers, or believes it discovers, that on the night when the crucifix was thrown down,

two men, two officers, one named La Barre, the other d'Etallonde, passed over the bridge of Abbeville, that they were drunk, and that they sang a guard-room song. The tribunal was the Seneschalcy of Abbeville. The Seneschalcy of Abbeville was equivalent to the court of the Capitouls of Toulouse. It was not less just. Two orders for arrest were issued. d'Etallonde escaped, La Barre was taken. Him they delivered to judicial examination. He denied having crossed the bridge; he confessed to having sung the song. The Seneschalcy of Abbeville condemned him; he appealed to the Parliament of Paris. He was conducted to Paris; the sentence was found good and confirmed. He was conducted back to Abbeville in chains. I abridge. The monstrous hour arrives. They begin by subjecting the Chevalier de La Barre to the torture, ordinary and extraordinary, to make him reveal his accomplices. Accomplices in what? In having crossed a bridge and sung a song. During the torture one of his knees was broken; his confessor, on hearing the bones crack, fainted away. The next day, June 5, 1766, La Barre was drawn to the great square of Abbeville, where flamed a penitential fire; the sentence was read to La Barre; then they cut off one

of his hands; then they tore out his tongue with iron pinchers; then, in mercy, his head was cut off and thrown into the fire. So died the Chevalier de La Barre. He was nineteen years of age. [Long and profound sensation.]

Then, O Voltaire! thou didst utter a cry of horror, and it will be thine eternal glory! [Thunders of applause.]

Then didst thou enter upon the appalling trial of the past; thou didst plead, against tyrants and monsters, the cause of the human race, and thou didst gain it. Great man, blessed be thou forever! [Renewed applause.]

Gentlemen, the frightful things which I have recalled were accomplished in the midst of a polite society; its life was gay and light; people went and came; they looked neither above nor below themselves; their indifference had become carelessness; graceful poets, Saint-Aulaire, Boufflers, Gentil-Bernard, composed pretty verses; the court was all festival; Versailles was brilliant; Paris ignored what was passing; and then it was that, through religious ferocity, the judges made an old man die upon the wheel, and the priests tore out a child's tongue for a song. [Vivid emotion. Applause.]

In the presence of this society, frivolous and dismal, Voltaire alone, having before his eyes

those united forces, the court, the nobility, capital; that unconscious power, the blind multitude; that terrible magistracy, so severe to subjects, so docile to the master, crushing and flattering, kneeling upon the people before the king [Bravo!] that clergy, vile *melange* of hypocrisy and fanaticism; Voltaire alone, I repeat it, declared war against that coalition of all the social iniquities, against that enormous and terrible world, and he accepted battle with it. And what was his weapon? That which has the lightness of the wind and the power of the thunderbolt. A pen. [Applause.]

With that weapon he fought; with that weapon he conquered.

Gentlemen, let us salute that memory.

Voltaire conquered; Voltaire waged the splendid kind of warfare, the war of one alone against all; that is to say, the grand warfare. The war of thought against matter, the war of reason against prejudice, the war of the just against the unjust, the war for the oppressed against the oppressor, the war of goodness, the war of kindness. He had the tenderness of a woman and the wrath of a hero. He was a great mind, and an immense heart. [Bravos.]

He conquered the old code and the old dogma. He conquered the feudal lord, the gothic judge,

the Roman priest. He raised the populace to the dignity of people. He taught, pacificated, and civilized. He fought for Sirven and Montbailly, as for Calas and La Barre; he accepted all the menaces, all the outrages, all the persecutions, calumny, and exile. He was indefatigable and immovable. He conquered violence by a smile, despotism by sarcasm, infallibility by irony, obstinacy by perseverance, ignorance by truth.

I have just pronounced the word *smile*. I pause at it. Smile! It is Voltaire.

Let us say it, gentlemen, pacification (*apaise-ment*?) is the great side of the philosopher: in Voltaire the equilibrium always reestablishes itself at last. Whatever may be his just wrath, it passes, and the irritated Voltaire always gives place to the Voltaire calmed. Then in that profound eye the SMILE appears.

That smile is wisdom. That smile, I repeat, is Voltaire. That smile sometimes becomes laughter, but the philosophic sadness tempers it. Toward the strong, it is mockery; toward the weak, it is a caress. It disquiets the oppressor, and reassures the oppressed. Against the great, it is raillery; for the little, it is pity. Ah, let us be moved by that smile! It had in it the rays of the dawn. It illuminated the

true, the just, the good, and what there is of worthy in the useful. It lighted up the interior of superstitions. Those ugly things it is salutary to see; he has shown them. Luminous, that smile was fruitful also. The new society, the desire for equality and concession, and that beginning of fraternity which called itself tolerance, reciprocal good-will, the just accord of men and rights, reason recognized as the supreme law, the annihilation of prejudices and fixed opinions, the serenity of souls, the spirit of indulgence and of pardon, harmony, peace —behold what has come from that great smile!

On the day—very near, without any doubt—when the identity of wisdom and clemency will be recognized, the day when the amnesty will be proclaimed, I affirm it, up there, in the stars, Voltaire will smile. [Triple salvo of applause. Cries, *Vive l'amnestie!*]

Gentlemen, between two servants of Humanity, who appeared eighteen hundred years apart, there is a mysterious relation.

To combat Pharisaism; to unmask imposture; to overthrow tyrannies, usurpations, prejudices, falsehoods, superstitions; to demolish the temple in order to rebuild it, that is to say, to replace the false by the true; to attack a ferocious magistracy; to attack a sanguinary

priesthood; to take a whip and drive the money-changers from the sanctuary; to reclaim the heritage of the disinherited; to protect the weak, the poor, the suffering, the overwhelmed, to struggle for the persecuted and oppressed—that was the war of Jesus Christ. And who waged that war? It was Voltaire.

The completion of the evangelical work is the philosophical work; the spirit of meekness began, the spirit of tolerance continued. Let us say it with a sentiment of profound respect: JESUS WEPT; VOLTAIRE SMILED. Of that divine tear and of that human smile is composed the sweetness of the present civilization. [Prolonged applause.]

Did Voltaire always smile? No. He was often indignant. You remarked it in my first words.

Certainly, gentlemen, measure, reserve, proportion are reason's supreme law. We can say that moderation is the very respiration of the philosopher. The effort of the wise man ought to be to condense into a sort of serene certainty all the approximations of which philosophy is composed. But at certain moments, the passion for the true rises powerful and violent, and it is within its right in so doing, like the stormy winds which purify. Never, I

insist upon it, will any wise man shake those two august supports of social labor, justice and hope; and all will respect the judge if he is embodied justice, and all will venerate the priest if he represents hope. But if the magistracy calls itself torture, if the Church calls itself Inquisition, then Humanity looks them in the face, and says to the judge: I will none of thy law! and says to the priest: I will none of thy dogma! I will none of thy fire upon earth and thy hell in the future! [Wild sensation. Prolonged applause.] Then philosophy rises in wrath, and arraigns the judge before justice, and the priest before God! [Redoubled applause.]

This is what Voltaire did. It was grand.

What Voltaire was, I have said; what his age was, I am about to say.

Gentlemen, great men rarely come alone; large trees seem larger when they dominate a forest; there they are at home. There was a forest of minds around Voltaire; that forest was the eighteenth century. Among those minds there were summits, Montesquieu, Buffon, Beaumarchais, and among others, two, the highest after Voltaire—Rousseau and Diderot. Those thinkers taught men to reason; reasoning well leads to acting well; justness in the

mind becomes justice in the heart. Those toilers for progress labored usefully. Buffon founded naturalism; Beaumarchais discovered outside of Molière, a kind of comedy till then unknown, almost the social comedy; Montesquieu made in law some excavations so profound that he succeeded in exhuming the right. As to Rousseau, as to Diderot, let us pronounce those two names apart; Diderot, a vast intelligence, inquisitive, a tender heart, a thirst for justice, wished to give certain notions as the foundation of true ideas, and created the encyclopaedia. Rousseau rendered to woman an admirable service, completing the mother by the nurse, placing near one another those two majesties of the cradle. Rousseau, a writer, eloquent and pathetic, a profound oratorical dreamer, often divined and proclaimed political truth; his ideal borders upon the real; he had the glory of being the first man in France who called himself citizen. The civic fiber vibrates in Rousseau; that which vibrates in Voltaire is the universal fiber. One can say that in the fruitful eighteenth century, Rosseau represented the people; Voltaire, still more vast, represented Man. Those powerful writers disappeared, but they left us their soul, the Revolution. [Applause.]

Yes, the French Revolution was their soul. It was their radiant manifestation. It came from them; we find them everywhere in that blest and superb catastrophe, which formed the conclusion of the past and the opening of the future. In that clear light, which is peculiar to revolutions, and which beyond causes permits us to perceive effects, and beyond the first plan the second, we see behind Danton Diderot, behind Robespierre Rousseau, and behind Mirabeau Voltaire. These formed those.

Gentlemen, to sum up epochs, by giving them the names of men, to name ages, to make of them in some sort human personages, has only been done by three peoples, Greece, Italy, France. We say, the Age of Pericles, the Age of Augustus, the Age of Leo X, the Age of Louis XIV, the Age of Voltaire. Those appellations have a great significance. This privilege of giving names to periods belonging exclusively to Greece, to Italy, and to France, is the highest mark of civilization. Until Voltaire, they were the names of the chiefs of states; Voltaire is more than the chief of a state; he is a chief of ideas; with Voltaire a new cycle begins. We feel that henceforth the supreme governmental power is to be thought. Civilization obeyed force; it will obey the ideal.

It was the scepter and the sword broken, to be replaced by the ray of light; that is to say, authority transfigured into liberty. Henceforth, no other sovereignty than the law for the people, and the conscience for the individual. For each of us, the two aspects of progress separate themselves clearly, and they are these: to exercise one's right; that is to say, to be a man; to perform one's duty; that is to say, to be a citizen.

Such is the signification of that word, the Age of Voltaire; such is the meaning of that august event, the French Revolution.

The two memorable centuries which preceded the eighteenth, prepared for it; Rabelais warned royalty in Gargantua, and Molière warned the church in Tartuffe. Hatred of force and respect for right are visible in those two illustrious spirits.

Whoever says today, *might makes right*, performs an act of the Middle Ages, and speaks to men three hundred years behind their time. [Repeated applause.]

Gentlemen, the nineteenth century glorifies the eighteenth century. The eighteenth proposed, the nineteenth concludes. And my last word will be the declaration, tranquil but inflexible, of progress.

The time has come. The right has found its formula: human federation.

Today, force is called violence, and begins to be judged; war is arraigned. Civilization, upon the complaint of the human race, orders the trial, and draws up the great criminal indictment of conquerors and captains. [Emotion.] This witness, History, is summoned. The reality appears. The factitious brilliancy is dissipated. In many cases, the hero is a species of assassin. [Applause.] The peoples begin to comprehend that increasing the magnitude of a crime cannot be its diminution; that, if to kill is a crime, to kill much cannot be an extenuating circumstance [Laughter and bravos]; that, if to steal is a shame, to invade cannot be a glory [Repeated applause]; that *Te Deums* do not count for much in this matter; that homicide is homicide; that bloodshed is bloodshed; that it serves nothing to call one's self Caesar or Napoleon; and that in the eyes of the eternal God, the figure of a murderer is not changed because, instead of a gallow's cap, there is placed upon his head an emperor's crown. [Long continued acclamation. Triple salvo of applause.]

Ah! let us proclaim absolute truths. Let us dishonor war. No; glorious war does not exist.

No; it is not good, and it is not useful, to make corpses. No; it cannot be that life travails for death. No; oh, mothers who surround me, it cannot be that war, the robber, should continue to take from you your children. No; it cannot be that women should bear children in pain, that men should be born, that people should plow and sow, that the farmer should fertilize the fields, and the workmen enrich the city, that industry should produce marvels, that genius should produce prodigies, that the vast human activity should, in presence of the starry sky, multiply efforts and creations, all to result in that frightful international exposition which is called a field of battle! [Profound sensation. The whole audience rises and applauds the orator.]

The true field of battle, behold it's here! It is this rendezvous of the masterpieces of human labor which Paris offers the world at this moment.*

The true victory is the victory of Paris. [Applause.]

Alas! we cannot hide it from ourselves, that the present hour, worthy as it is of admiration and respect, has still some mournful aspects; there are still shadows upon the horizon; the

*The exposition of 1878 was then open in Paris.

tragedy of the peoples is not finished; war, wicked war, is still there, and it has the audacity to lift its head in the midst of this august festival of peace. Princes, for two years past, obstinately adhere to a fatal misunderstanding; their discord forms an obstacle to our concord, and they are ill-inspired to condemn us to the statement of such a contrast.

Let this contrast lead us back to Voltaire. In the presence of menacing possibilities, let us be more pacific than ever. Let us turn toward that great death, toward that great life, toward that great spirit. Let us bend before the venerated tombs. Let us take counsel of him whose life, useful to men, was extinguished a hundred years ago, but whose work is immortal. Let us take counsel of the other powerful thinkers, the auxiliaries of this glorious Voltaire, of Jean Jacques, of Diderot, of Montesquieu. Let us give the word to those great voices. Let us stop the effusion of human blood. Enough! enough! despots. Ah! barbarism persists; very well, let civilization be indignant. Let the eighteenth century come to the help of the nineteenth. The philosophers, our predecessors, are the apostles of the true; let us invoke those illustrious shades; let them, before monarchies meditate wars, pro-

claim the right of man to life, the right of conscience to liberty, the sovereignty of reason, the holiness of labor, the beneficence of peace; and since night issues from the thrones, let the light come from the tombs. [Acclamations unanimous and prolonged. From all sides bursts the cry: "Vive Victor Hugo."]

A SKETCH OF VOLTAIRE

Francois Marie Arouet, generally known by the name of Voltaire, was born at Chatenay on February 20, 1694. To write his life during those eighty-three years would be to give the intellectual history of Europe.

While Voltaire was living at Ferney in 1768, he gave a curious exhibition of that profane sportiveness which was a strong element in his character. On Easter Sunday he took his secretary Wagnière with him to commune at the village church, and also "to lecture a little those scoundrels who steal continually." Apprised of Voltaire's sermon on theft, the Bishop of Anneci rebuked him, and finally "forbade every curate, priest, and monk of his diocese to confess, absolve or give the communion to the seigneur of Ferney, with his express orders, under pain of interdiction." With a wicked

light in his eyes, Voltaire said he could commune in spite of the Bishop; nay, that the ceremony should be gone through in his chamber. Then ensued an exquisite comedy, which shakes one's side even as described by the stolid Wagnière. Feigning a deadly sickness, Voltaire took to his bed. The surgeon, who found his pulse was excellent, was bamboozled into certifying that he was in danger of death. Then the priest was summoned to administer the last consolation. The poor devil at first objected, but Voltaire threatened him with legal proceedings for refusing to bring the sacrament to a dying man, who had never been excommunicated. This was accompanied with a grave declaration that M. de Voltaire "had never ceased to respect and to practice the Catholic religion." Eventually the priest came "half dead with fear." Voltaire demanded absolution at once, but the Capuchin pulled out of his pocket a profession of faith, drawn up by the Bishop, which Voltaire was required to sign. Then the comedy deepened. Voltaire kept demanding absolution, and the distracted priest kept presenting the document for his signature. At last the Lord of Ferney had his way. The priest gave him the wafer, and Voltaire declared "Having my God in my mouth,"

that he forgave his enemies. Directly he left the room, Voltaire leaped briskly out of bed, where a minute before he seemed unable to move. "I have had a little trouble," he said to Wagnière, "with this comical genius of a Capuchin; but that was only for amusement, and to accomplish a good purpose. Let us take a turn in the garden. I told you I would be confessed and commune in my bed, in spite of M. Biord."

Voltaire treated Christianity so lightly that he confessed and took the sacrament for a joke. Is it wonderful if he did the same thing on his death-bed to secure the decent burial for his corpse? He remembered his own bitter sorrow and indignation, which he expressed in burning verse, when the remains of poor Adrienne Lecouvreur were refused sepulture because she died outside the pale of the Church. Fearing similar treatment himself, he arranged to cheat the Church again. By the agency of his nephew, the Abbé Mignot, the Abbé Gautier was brought to his bedside, and according to Condorcet he "confessed Voltaire, receiving from him a profession of faith, by which he declared that he died in the Catholic religion, wherein he was born." This story is generally credited, but its truth is by no means indis-

putable; for in the Abbé Gautier's declaration to the Prior of the Abbey of Scellieres, where Voltaire's remains were interred, he says that when he visited M. de Voltaire, he found him *"unfit to be confessed."*

The curate of St. Sulpice was annoyed at being forestalled by the Abbé Gautier, and as Voltaire was his parishioner he demanded "a detailed profession of faith and a disavowal of all heretical doctrines." He paid the dying Freethinker many unwelcome visits, in the vain hope of obtaining a full recantation, which would be a fine feather in his hat. The last of these visits is thus described by Wagnière, who was an eye-witness to the scene. I take Carlyle's translation:

"Two days before that mournful death, M. l'Abbe Mignot, his nephew, went to seek the Cure of St. Sulpice and the Abbe Gauthier, and brought them into his uncle's sick room; who, on being informed that the Abbe Gauthier was there, 'Ah, well!' said he, 'give him my compliments and my thanks.' The Abbe spoke some words to him, exhorting him to patience. The Cure of St. Sulpice then came forward, having announced himself, and asked of M. de Voltaire, elevating his voice, if he acknowledged the divinity of our Lord Jesus Christ? The sick man pùshed one of his hands against the Cure's calotte (coif), shoving him back, and cried, turning abruptly to the other side, 'Let me die in

peace (Laissez-moi mourir en paix).' The Cure seemingly considered his person soiled, and his coif dishonored, by the touch of the philosopher. He made the sick-nurse give him a little brushing, and then went out with the Abbe Gauthier."

A further proof that Voltaire made no real recantation lies in the fact that the Bishop of Troyes sent a peremptory dispatch to the Prior of Scellieres, which lay in his diocese, forbidding him to inter the heretic's remains. The dispatch, however, arrived too late, and Voltaire's ashes remained there until 1791, when they were removed to Paris and placed in the Pantheon, by order of the National Assembly.

Voltaire's last moments are described by Wagnière. I again take Carlyle's translation:

"He expired about a quarter past eleven at night, *with the most perfect tranquility,* after having suffered the cruelest pains in consequence of those fatal drugs, which his own imprudence, and especially that of the persons who should have looked to it, made him swallow. Ten minutes before his last breath he took the hand of Morand, his valet-de-chambre, who was watching him, pressed it, and said, *'Adieu, mon cher Morand, je me meurs'*— 'Adieu, my dear Morand, I am gone.' These are the last words uttered by M. de Voltaire."

Such are the facts of Voltaire's decease. He made no recantation, he refused to utter or sign a confession of faith, but with the con-

nivance of his nephew, the Abbé Mignot, he tricked the Church into granting him a decent burial, not choosing to be flung into a ditch or buried like a dog. His heresy was never seriously questioned at the time, and the clergy actually clamored for the expulsion of the Prior who had allowed his body to be interred in a church vault.

Many years afterwards the priests pretended that Voltaire died raving. They declared that Marshal Richelieu was horrified by the scene and obliged to leave the chamber. From France the pious concoction spread to England, until it was exposed by Sir Charles Morgan, who published the following extracts from a letter by Dr. Burard, who, as assistant physician, was constantly about Voltaire in his last moments:

"I feel happy in being able, while paying homage to the truth, to destroy the effects of the lying stories which have been told respecting the last moments of Mons. de Voltaire. I was, by office, one of those who were appointed to watch the whole progress of his illness, with M. M. Tronchin, Lorry, and Try, his medical attendants. I never left him for an instant during his last moments, and I can certify that we invariably observed in him the same strength of character, though his disease was necessarily attended with horrible pain. (Here follow the details of his case.) We positively forbade him to speak in order to prevent the increase

of a spitting of blood, with which he was attacked; still he continued to communicate with us by means of little cards, on which he wrote his questions; we replied to him verbally, and if he was not satisfied, he always made his observations to us in writing. He therefore, retained his faculties up to the last moment, and the fooleries which have been attributed to him are deserving of the greatest contempt. It could not even be said that such or such person had related any circumstance of his death, as being witness to it; for at the last,, admission to his chamber was forbidden to any person. Those who came to obtain intelligence respecting the patient, waited in the saloon, and other apartments at hand. The proposition, therefore, which has been put in the mouth of Marshal Richelieu is as unfounded as the rest.

"Paris, April 3rd, 1819.

(Signed) BURARD."

Another slander appears to emanate from the Abbé Barruel, who was so well informed about Voltaire that he calls him "the dying Atheist," when, as all the world knows, he was a Deist.

"In his last illness he sent for Dr. Tronchin. When the doctor came, he found Voltaire in the greatest agony, exclaiming with the utmost horror —'I am abandoned by God and man.' He then said, 'Doctor, I will give you half of what I am worth, if you will give me six months' life.' The doctor answered, 'Sir, you cannot live six weeks.' Voltaire replied, 'Then I shall go to hell, and you will go with me!' and soon after expired."

When the clergy are reduced to manufacture such contemptible rubbish as this, they must indeed be in great straits. It is flatly contradicted by the evidence of every contemporary of Voltaire.

My readers will, I think, be fully satisfied that Voltaire neither recanted nor died raving, but remained a skeptic to the last; passing away quietly, at a ripe old age, to "the undiscovered country from whose bourne no traveler returns," and leaving behind him a name that brightens the track of time.

GEORG BRANDES ON VOLTAIRE

By Julius Moritzen.

It is hardly to be expected that 144 years after the death of Francois de Voltaire any new and startling facts should have been discovered anent the career of one of the greatest Frenchmen that ever lived. But there is that in the writings of Georg Brandes that when this Danish critic and internationalist undertakes a task like that of writing a new history of Voltaire we are very sure to find an old subject given a new interpretation. That Brandes' "Francois de Voltaire" is today considered perhaps the most picturesque presentation of a personality whose influence on the history of France has been most profound is but a natural corollary considering what the author of "William Shakespeare, a Critical Study," did in the case of England when analyzing the character of Shakespeare.

Georg Brandes places Voltaire in the various environments that went to widen the horizon of the French satirist, and it is quite apart from his literary achievements that Voltaire rises before the reader's mind as having done

so much for making nations better acquainted with each other. Himself a man with an international vision, Brandes for this reason emphasizes Voltaire's English education and what English culture of that period did toward infusing the spirit of liberalism into a France surcharged with the dominance of a Louis XV through an arrogant court circle. Whether or not Voltaire led the way for the Revolution that swept aside a regime that became unbearable, the fact is not to be denied that his last stay at Ferney saw him prepare unconsciously for an event that he had inspired while he himself was far from being revolutionary in spirit.

Banished from French soil for so great a part of his life, Francois de Voltaire could not fail to discern the weak points of his own country's national life as compared with what England had to show him. Brandes is very explicit on this score.

"Voltaire was released from the Bastile on the second day of May on orders of the King and his royal highness, the Duke," writes Brandes, "and Conde was instructed to accompany him to Calais and watch him go on board and leave the harbor. His exile, designed as

a punishment, proved in every way an advantage to his development."

Differing as day from night, English social conditions as compared with the France of the period could not fail to impress the young exile.

"Landing at Greenwich," Brandes continues, "Voltaire slept his first night in London at Lord Bolingbroke's palace in Pall Mall, after spending the evening in the company of ladies and gentlemen of the most exclusive society. Bolingbroke knew the foremost writers of England, so that through him Voltaire could immediately make their acquaintance, except where language prevented. Bolingbroke called the triumvirate of the English Parnassus, Pope, Swift and Gray, by their first names. Voltaire could not have had a better introduction to the literary and aristocratic world of England."

It was characteristic of the manners and customs of the day that Voltaire arrived in England supplied with letters of introduction from members of the very French government that had exiled him. The abler men among the ministers were apparently ashamed that they had been obliged to exile a man, not because of what wrongs he had done but because of the injustice he had suffered. The French

minister of foreign affairs, M. de Morville, requested Horatio Walpole, a brother of the English Premier, Sir Robert Walpole, and Stair's successor as England's ambassador to France, to do all he could for the welfare of Voltaire on English soil.

Brandes places emphasis on a letter Walpole wrote the Duke of Newcastle as follows: "I trust you will pardon me when, at the earnest solicitation of M. de Morville, I recommend to you M. de Voltaire, a writer and a most talented one who has recently come to England in order to have published through subscription a splendid poem, called 'Henry IV.' It is true that he has been imprisoned in the Bastile, but not on account of anything having to do with the government. It was merely through a dispute with a private individual, and I therefore hope that your Excellency will bestow on him your favor and protection by furthering the subscription."

Walpole wrote a similar letter to Bubb Dodington, Duke of Melcombe, the rich and highly placed patron of men of letters in whose house in Eastbury Voltaire lived for more than three months, and whom he always remembered with gratitude as a wealthy and active man, of keen intelligence and sound character. Voltaire at

a later period introduced Thierot to him with the remark that he had once sent Dodington his "History of Charles XII" but that now he sent him something much better.

In Eastbury, Voltaire made the acquaintance of Edward Young who, later, was to win repute as a devotional writer, and eventually became his friend. Young had not then become a clergyman and had not yet written his "Night Thoughts" which Voltaire later called a "confusing mixture of bombastical and obscure trivialities." In Eastbury Voltaire met also James Thomson, the popular author of "The Seasons," and the impression he left on him was that of a "great genius and great simplicity."

Very characteristic of Brandes' style and analytical skill is the following: "From the very first Voltaire had access to the Minister Robert Walpole, the Duke of Newcastle, the Archduchess of Marlborough, and the two courts, that of the King and of the Prince and Princess of Wales. Some years before he had paid his respects, though only in a literary fashion, to King George I, when in 1718 he sent him his 'Ædipe' with flattering verses which have a humorous effect today. He termed the clumsy boarish Hanoveranian a

man of wisdom and a hero, whereupon the King sent Lord Stair a watch as a gift to Voltaire. A letter from Voltaire to his Lordship requests that he send the watch to his father, for Voltaire evidently hoped to raise himself in his parent's eyes when he saw that he had a son who received presents from an English monarch."

"What most impressed Voltaire," Brandes continues, "who had come from a country where the gag was the sceptre, the chief instrument of the art of government, was the utter absence of such a thing in England. Here every writer, from Swift downward, could attack the policy of the cabinet with a derisive violence that in France would have put him behind the bars for life. Here no one touched a hair on his head. Most remarkable of all, he found this freedom of speech was perfectly consistent with peace and order.

"Voltaire discovered that in England nobility did not stand for caste, but that the great merchant whose trade benefited England and the world was raised to the nobility while he gave the younger sons to civic enterprise and industry. It is unquestionably true that while Voltaire's exile was meant as a punishment it brought the young writer knowledge and in-

sight. It sharpened his sense for what was actual and his instinct for the possible. It gave to his inborn elasticity of mind that practical understanding without which there can be no great writer."

II.

While there is no lack of historical accounts about the relations existing between Voltaire and Frederick the Great, yet there are phases of that relationship which still lend themselves to fresh interpretation when viewed by one so keenly analytical as Georg Brandes. The Danish critic declares emphatically that history can show few instances where a ruler in his relations with a great productive mentality has proceeded in such a way as to make the contact significant to both principals.

"In ancient times," Brandes writes, "Aristotle was the teacher of Alexander, and the latter, when on his campaign would send Aristotle books and material for study. But Alexander could exert no influence on the philosopher. Caesar and Cicero knew each other thoroughly. Cicero was Caesar's political opponent. Nevertheless, Caesar paid homage to Cicero as the representative of literature and repaid his attacks by showing him knightly

attention. But neither Caesar nor Cicero owed each other any intellectual enrichment.

"In later times the relations between Goethe and Karl August lasted from the early youth of both until the death of the prince. Goethe was indebted to the Duke of Weimar for a secure position and received through this connection much experience. But intellectual impression he did not obtain from this source, for in spite of Karl August's considerable capability, a genius he was not.

"In even later times there is the relationship between Richard Wagner and Ludwig II. Wagner had King Ludwig to thank for comfort and a place where he could work in quiet. But the King did not influence the composer intellectually.

"The historical relation between Voltaire and Frederick the Great stands alone. This is no harmonious relationship. In the course of the first fifteen years enthusiasm is abroad; then the friendship is undermined through Voltaire's undisciplined methods and Frederick's exasperation. Then again the relationship is renewed, the break is healed and the friendliness is maintained through the lives of both. This is striking evidence of the spirit of world-citizenship that prevailed in the eighteenth cen-

tury, since the ruler and the writer belong to two different people, even while their language is the same. But the decisive fact here is that both the writer and the ruler are geniuses, the acknowledged geniuses of the period, and that they influence each other."

Where Georg Brandes excels in portraying great men of the past is in his masterful pictures of contrasts, the analytical and synthetic so nicely proportioned that in its final presentation the picture leaves no doubt but what scholarly devotion to a set task leaves little to be said on the subject beyond what Brandes himself contributes. On the question of the Voltaire relationship with Frederick he writes further:

"When in August, 1736, Voltaire received the first letter from the Crown Prince of Prussia he was in his forty-second year. The writer was 24 years old. Voltaire was famed throughout Europe and looked upon as the most important author of the period. Frederick was a young prince, unknown except for what he had gone through. He had had to suffer for his inclination and peculiar intellectuality, just as Voltaire had to pay a price for his wit and the revolutionary might of his thinking. Both had been the victims of the

brutality of the time and the arbitrariness of the system of government.

"The father of Frederick, whom Carlyle idealized, in spite of all his good qualities as organizer, was restive and quick tempered; with all his rectitude often raw and cruel. He had prescribed an educational program for his son that excluded everything unnecessary, among this Latin and literature. The King detested everything foreign. If he permitted French this was simply because German was then scarcely considered a language. He took pleasure in personally giving his subjects a beating on the street in case the one or other incident gave him dissatisfaction.

"When Frederick as a youth studied forbidden things, got into debt, cared nothing for parades of the troops, the father demanded that he should renounce his right to the throne. When he refused he was treated barbarously, called a coward because he did not resist. In 1730 he made an attempt to escape to England. But an intercepted letter to his friend Katte revealed the scheme to the King. Again he was treated abominably and a court-martial was appointed for the purpose of sentencing him to death. That was the custom of the time. Twelve years before, Peter the Great had his

son Alexei beaten to death and he himself wielded the knout. When the Prussian court-martial failed to act as blindly as the Russian the King had the prince put in prison in Kuestrin."

Passing over the years intervening between that earlier time and when Frederick ascended the throne, May 31, 1740, a period replete with letter writing and exchange of compliments describing in Brandes' inimitable manner, the Danish critic tells of Frederick's joy that now at last he can come face to face with the object of his admiration.

"Frederick, in spite of the many things to occupy him, makes his debut as a true disciple of Voltaire," declares Brandes. "His first act is the doing away with torture as punishment, the dissolution of the Potsdam guard, the guard that the father had hired, secured at whatever cost, and calling back a thinker like Wolff to become once more professor at Halle."

The first meeting between Voltaire and Frederick the Great gives Brandes an opportunity for bringing into play his exceptional faculty for entering into the very minutest description of these contrasting personalities, and while German culture of that day affected the French satirist quite differently from what

he experienced on English soil, still there is no doubt that Voltaire's international outlook was broadened through contact with the King who in his own way stood head and shoulders over his people.

Badly as Voltaire was being treated at home, the fact that the King of Prussia made so much of him and gave his admiration public expression did not fail to improve his status in the eyes of the leading men of France. The time had gone by when Louis XIV dominated Europe so that fear prevailed because of the French generals and armies. A number of defeats like that at Dettingen resulted in the fact that Europe as a whole made merry on account of French politics and French militarism.

Outside of France Louis the Beloved did not count. All eyes were directed toward the King of Prussia. Every power tried to draw him within its particular circle. The English strove to keep alive his dislike of France. It would mean much to the French nation, who so far had been unable to retain her former allies and had been unsuccessful in gaining new ones, if it by any possibility could enter into an alliance with just that King whose name spelled ingenious energy. Frederick was a hero to Voltaire. On the other hand, Vol-

taire was the idol of the King. At any rate, therefore, it was worth the trial to utilize the poet as secret diplomat.

What followed has been dealt with exhaustively by many able pens, but Brandes manages to give the historical facts a setting so picturesque and informing that the entire relationships between Frederick the Great and Voltaire appears in a new light and illustrates pointedly what the French nation owed to the man whose doctrines were the cause of a persecution that reflects little glory on the period so far as France was concerned. Nevertheless, Francois de Voltaire has found in the twentieth century no writer who to better purpose brings out the particular qualities that places him among the great internationalists than Georg Brandes has done in his monumental work.

III.

"Voltaire's 'Charles XII,'" says Brandes, "stands as a portrait of a remarkable man, executed by a master. It caused Europe to take an interest in the Sweden of that time comparable with what Denmark must thank Shakespeare for in the case of Hamlet.

"Characteristically enough, Voltaire starts his story by a dramatic contrast between the two main persons, Charles XII and Peter the Great, both of whom are sketched in detail. Peter is immediately brought on the scene because no matter how great the interest of the author in the Swedish King's grandly-planned character and his remarkable fate, his real hero is not Charles, but Peter; not only that bellicose and obstinate in Peter's character that plunged his country into misfortune, but the sovereign who in spite of the brutal in the pleasures that he sought, in spite of the wildness and cruel vengefulness was an educator, a civilizing influence who conquered a barbarism many centuries old, and introduced industry, technique, building art, science among a people gifted in a way, but fighting against innovations.

"With that clarity that is Voltaire's foundation quality as historian he places Polish society and the Polish nation side by side with the Swedish and the Russian, and thus the description of August the Strong's and later Stanislaw Leszczynski's personalities is as necessary as a background as the characterization of the Swedish and Russian nature

through the presentation of Charles XII and Peter the Great."

With regard to Voltaire's relations to Russia as a whole, Brandes tells how Frederick the Great looked with jealous eyes on the attention that Voltaire paid to the Russian people in depicting the life-work of Peter, since he looked for undivided devotion of the man whose pen in that day was enough to shed luster on a country. Elizabeth, the daughter of Peter the Great, while uncouth in many ways, was not without taste for intellect and wit, and in approaching Voltaire after becoming Empress sent him her portrait surrounded by large diamonds. But it was in the person of Catherine II that Voltaire a second time enters into acquaintance with a sovereign who is also a genius, a decided and reformative genius, who puts herself into apprenticeship under him and does everything to show him how grateful she is for what he has done.

"There are certain parallels between Frederick and Catherine," states Brandes. "Both were of German antecedents and had in their blood German respect for intellectual superiority, the German taste for knowledge and mental values. But neither one stood in any

cultural relation to Germanism; both wrote and spoke French to perfection. Both were Voltairians to their fingers' tips. But in spite of their love for French civilization neither one of them had ever seen Paris or France."

IV.

There is a reference to Voltaire's internationalism and view of life in the closing chapter of Brandes' work on the great Frenchman which sums up his personality in a most conspicuous manner, as follows:

"There exists a curious little planet, the highly gifted population of which is distinguished among other things by its equally thoughtless tendency to praise and condemn. It poisons its wise men, it crucifies its saviors, its heroes and thinkers it burns at the stake, its deliverer it puts into prison, then releases them, utilizes them, applauds them after they have died, and then usually puts them into a hole as one would filth or treasure.

"The giant from Sirius discovered this little planet in the universe and found that it was populated by what to him seem funny little creatures, mostly concerned with making existence unpleasant for each other, to

destroy and eliminate each other. He did not underestimate their many no doubt valuable and lovable qualities. Now and then he saw them aid each other.

"But he wondered at their marked predilections to misunderstand, ill use and praise their leading personalities. Those who would drag these little beings out of that mudbed of stupidity into which they not unseldom had strayed they liked best of all to drown in this mire. Afterwards they would raise statues in honor of these same individuals, in earliest times made of wood or stone, later of gold and ivory, more recently of marble and bronze. When this was done they took pleasure in throwing all kinds of filthiness on these statues, cleanse them again, then once more defile them, and after a long period let them appear finally in their true shape and color."

Here we have the story of Francois de Voltaire in a nutshell.

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